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Guest editorial

Dis/articulating producers, markets, and regions: new directions in critical studies of commodity chains

In 2008 Werner and Bair proposed a 'disarticulations perspective' as an intervention into the commodity chains and production networks literatures in sociology, geography, and development studies (Bair and Werner, 2011a).[1] While these literatures effectively called our attention to the dynamics of transnational network relations, and especially to the forms of governance through which commodity circuits are coordinated, we (Bair and Werner) argued that extant chain frameworks suffered from an empirical and theoretical bias towards the study of the *incorporation* of people and places into these circuits. This 'inclusionary bias' results from our tendency, as researchers, to follow the chain, in effect chasing capital to the newest frontier of a production network. Such an approach, we argued, gives short shrift to the uneven geographies of capitalism, and how these geographies shape, and are shaped by, production networks. Our intervention proposed displacing the departure point of commodity chain analysis from network-type models of interfirm transactions to the relationship between global networks and the patterned and contingent reproduction of uneven development. Thus, rather than focusing on the consequences of incorporation into a commodity chain, we wanted instead to ask what are the conditions that enable commodity circuits to form and reform over time.

Originally, the commodity chain construct was deployed by world-systems theorists to chart the expansion of a worldwide division of labor. Although we see our project as an extension of this research tradition, we also conceptualize the commodity chain somewhat differently. Rather than an advancing frontier that proceeds by incorporating territorial and social relations *inside* a hierarchical core–periphery structure of global capitalism, for us the commodity chain is a constantly shifting boundary that demarcates an *outside within* and *reproduces uneven relations at a variety of scales.* Influenced by Stuart Hall's notion of articulation developed in the 1980s and more recent literature on primitive accumulation, we proposed the concept of disarticulations to highlight the instabilities, disruptions, and provisional outsides of global production networks. Specifically, we wanted to theorize the significance of these processes for the formation and ongoing restructuring of commodity circuits.

The timing of our intervention was not surprising. Uneven development and, in particular, the relationship between capitalist processes and their constitutive outsides has emerged decisively on the agenda of critical social sciences in the last decade. In the wake of the ongoing restructuring of regimes of capitalist accumulation, we have seen renewed attention given to a set of empirically pervasive, but undertheorized, processes of exclusion from and marginalization within capitalist relations. The concrete expression of these processes includes volatile shifts in the geography of production; the concomitant de/revaluation of labor; iterative, often violent, forms of dispossession; and everyday struggles over value through which subjects navigate their own reproduction as workers, managers, farmers, traders, and 'surplus-ed' populations. Our notion of disarticulations then seeks to better understand these forms of exclusion and marginalization in order to rethink the capitalist

[1] The concept was developed by Bair and Werner in a set of themed panels at the 2008 meeting of the Association of American Geographers, and subsequently published as a theme issue of *Environment and Planning A* in 2011 (volume 43, number 5).

commodity and its circulation as an effect of iteratively reproducing the social and spatial boundaries and relations of 'regular' accumulation.

Disarticulations and marketization

More than a simple extension or elaboration of the first theme issue, this issue represents our collective efforts to bring together the set of concerns outlined in Bair and Werner's work on disarticulations with Berndt and Boeckler's collaborative investigations on the 'geographies of marketization'. Reflecting the dialogue between the distinct approaches explored by each pair of collaborators, we insert a slash (/) into the term dis/articulations, a nomenclature that emphasizes our shared concern for the paradoxical double movement of articulation: the conjunctural connections of commodities, people, and places, and complex processes of separation and exclusion, that together constitute circuits of commodity production.

Pervasive across the papers in this theme issue and our different approaches is an attempt to theorize the relationship between inclusion in and exclusion from particular commodity chains, and the specific social relations that enable these processes. Conceptually, the notion of articulation opens up the possibility for analyses that are attentive to contingency, while maintaining a commitment to theorizing macrostructures and systems. Bair and Werner draw upon the tradition of articulation from agrarian studies, feminist theory, and Gramscian-inspired approaches developed by geographers like Massey and Hart. This leads them to focus on articulation and disarticulation in terms of (1) the making and unmaking of regional class projects of capitalist development; (2) the reworking of surplus value extraction through the rearticulation of capitalist relations of production and hierarchies of social difference in the labor process; and (3) the complex and contested processes of dispossession, devaluation, and exclusion through which the commodity form is (re)produced.

Informed by actor network theory, social studies of economization, and political economy, Berndt and Boeckler's emphasis is on the construction of the market and the processes by which a market order expands. They conceive of marketization as the core principle of neoliberal restructuring and argue for an empirical investigation of market making in order to highlight the inherent and veiled contradictions of capitalist development (Boeckler and Berndt, 2013). Geographies of marketization focus in particular on 'things' and 'science': that is, 'market devices' and 'economics', respectively, and ask how these elements enact processes of framing that produce and stabilize economic entities, including commodity markets and the economic subjects that populate them. From a marketization perspective, two interwoven dimensions of framing can be highlighted in order to understand how markets are configured. On the one hand, market integration occurs through a double process of b/ordering: (1) the demarcation of a clear boundary between market-inside and market-outside in what are more adequately conceptualized as broader borderlands of neoliberal capitalism; and (2) the movement of this boundary, once in place, so as to extend the market to people, things, and regions hitherto regarded as lying outside. On the other hand, there is the corresponding practical question of how concrete markets are designed, implemented, maintained, and reproduced. Concrete markets result from the performative realization of closely interrelated 'orderings', including the conversion of goods, people, and regions into commodities, the formatting of calculative agencies, and the identification of the formative settings (sociotechnical devices involving material elements and procedures) through which encounters between goods and agencies are organized (Berndt and Boeckler 2012).

It is important to note, however, that market making does not always proceed smoothly; instances of failure and breakdown are as constitutive of the process as the construction and stabilization of a market order. Marketization therefore shares with disarticulations a focus on the concrete practices through which economic orders emerge. As a counterpart to the language of inclusion and exclusion that Werner and Bair use to describe these practices vis-à-vis commodity chains, Berndt and Boeckler diagnose practices of *entanglement* and *disentanglement* that connect and disconnect people, things and places with capitalist commodity production.

Another affinity between our two approaches is the importance placed on everyday practices of value creation, devaluation, and exclusion that reproduce the uneven geographies of global capitalism. The marketization approach does this by drawing attention to the b/ordering processes that define the market in relation to the constitutive outside of capitalism, thus giving temporary form to economic entities such as markets, firms, or value chains. In this context, geographies of marketization are especially interested in the quotidian 'how' of articulation, putting emphasis on the role of sociotechnical market devices in holding together heterogeneous assemblages, and showing that it is through the interplay of humans and nonhumans that economic entities are constituted.

Geographically, both approaches take the spatial form as a process that is iteratively produced through particular practices, and assumes a relational quality that can therefore never be taken as a stable entity. In line with postcolonial approaches, the aim of both perspectives is to destabilize formulations in commodity studies that reify stages of development, and to substitute a political economic analysis for a teleological evaluation of 'success' or 'failure' in the creation and capture of value in commodity chains. In this context, it is the particular strength of marketization to show very clearly how spatial boundaries—b/orders, in particular—are indispensable for producing economic entities (see Berndt and Boeckler, 2011). In contrast to this, a disarticulations perspective is more attentive to the spatialization of social relations and how phases of accumulation layer on top of one another to produce regional formations and places as materializations of class relations (see Bair and Werner, 2011b).

Having now briefly discussed what we see as the synergies and differences between the disarticulations perspective and the marketization approach, we should acknowledge that the papers in this collection engage these ideas in diverse ways and to different degrees. In what follows we outline some of the ways in which the individual papers engage, extend, and reformulate our shared concern for theorizing the uneven geographies of capitalist commodity production.

Commodity chains, sociospatial difference, and regional struggles over development

For Bair and Werner, the disarticulations perspective is first and foremost a way of asking how sociospatial difference is implicated in the process of development. Four of the papers in our collection speak directly to this question; they are concerned primarily with the making of place through the ongoing, and often contested, struggle between different social classes and their claims for inclusion in, and control over, the terms of development. They demonstrate how such struggles work through and are shaped by commodity chains, in turn reflecting and remaking geographies of uneven development. The role of the state—including its inaction—looms large in many of the papers here, suggesting the need for more dialogue between critical commodity studies and the literature on ongoing forms of neoliberalization.

Anne-Marie Debbané's (2013) analysis of horticultural production in South Africa's Ceres Valley focuses on the socioecological dimension of disarticuation—understood here through the lens of the hydrosocial cycle, or the set of social conditions and relations through which water is produced and distributed as a resource. Debbané examines a particular water project—the Koekedouw Dam—to demonstrate how struggles over access to water are exacerbating longstanding tensions between white farmers and black farmworkers, as well as between urban areas and rural ones. The Koekedouw Dam was built in 1998 as a privately financed water project to fuel the region's export-oriented fruit farms. When world-market prices for these commodities declined, the local agrarian elite found itself unable to service the loan. The South African government, in a departure from the neoliberal orientation that guided many of its policies, agreed to provide economic assistance if black farmers could be counted among the project's beneficiaries. Since there were no black-owned farms in the region, a putative land-reform program was carried out, resulting in joint ventures between white farmers and large numbers of black worker-shareholders. However, these reforms failed to redistribute land in any meaningful way or to create commercially viable black-owned farms.

Debbané also describes how the same white, large-scale producers benefitting from state support of the dam project were simultaneously restructuring their labor forces so as to make increased use of temporary, contract workers. Consequently, many retrenched farmworkers migrated to urban areas, where they put increased pressure on already strained municipal resources, including water provision. In short, the hydrosocial cycle crystallizes a set of processes by which white agrarian capital has reproduced itself in the postapartheid era. Debbané emphasizes that these processes occur in the context of racialized histories of dispossession that are ongoing, including the devaluation of labor through the spatial and structural reorganization of the labor market, and the accompanying disinvestment by local landowners in the social reproduction of farmworkers.

Sandy Brown's (2013) paper examines how the banana-growing region of Urabá, Colombia, became articulated into the commodity chain for 'ethical bananas' over the course of the last decade. The controversies surrounding the extension of the Fairtrade label to large-scale agricultural production notwithstanding, Urabá's participation in the ethical banana market is impressive when viewed in light of the banana sector's long and fraught history in the region. Large-scale banana production was consolidated in Urabá during the middle decades of the 20th century, largely via the dispossession of small-scale farmers by banana industrialists and cattle ranchers. During the 1970s and 1980s labor militancy increased dramatically among banana workers, resulting in significant gains. Agroindustrial elites threatened by these developments responded by bankrolling paramilitaries to suppress workers and destabilize the labor movement. This counteroffensive to roll back labor's strength brought substantial unrest and violence to the region.

In the meantime, some of the same members of the agroelite that were repressing workers began creating social foundations to aid local communities, providing basic services that the Colombian state was unwilling or unable to deliver. It is in these foundations that Brown locates the origins of Urabá's Fairtrade bananas. When the Fairtrade program expanded to cover plantations as well as small-scale growers, Urabá's banana producers saw an opportunity to market their history of private sector philanthropy, recasting themselves as pioneers of corporate social responsibility and rearticulating their efforts to better resonate with Fairtrade's agenda of promoting ethical production. Thus Brown suggests that Urabá has been incorporated into the Fairtade banana chain not in spite of the dispossession, dislocations, and violence that attended the industry's development, but rather because of this history. Furthermore, she points out that the certification of some plantations and not others may undermine labor solidarity in the region, since only workers on Fairtrade plantations receive the Fairtrade premium, despite the fact that labor conditions across the farms are relatively uniform, thanks to a sector-wide collective bargaining agreement. While Fairtrade certification may represent an upgrading trajectory bringing benefits to some plantation workers, it also creates a new axis of sociospatial difference along Colombia's banana corridor, which agroelites may be able to exploit in the future.

Bradley Wilson's (2013) paper challenges conventional readings of the 'world coffee crisis' that occurred at the turn of the millennium. Like many other rural regions dependent on the global coffee trade, the communities of Matagalpa, Nicaragua were negatively affected when changes in the geography and governance of the coffee commodity chain triggered a precipitous decline in coffee prices. Yet, as Wilson emphasizes, from the vantage point of these communities, the downturn was only the most recent, if dramatic, episode in a protracted struggle for land and livelihoods in Nicaragua's countryside. Many of those who had labored in coffee fields prior to the Revolution did not benefit from the agrarian reform carried out by the Sandinistas. Instead of becoming coffee-producing smallholders, they became workers on state-run coffee estates. When the Sandinistas lost power in 1990, the coffee estates were converted into private enterprises that could be farmed under long-term leases by worker shareholders who would eventually be given an option to buy the land they worked. Much like the joint venture scheme in South Africa described in Debbané's paper, this arrangement failed to secure access to land and sustainable livelihoods for a historically marginalized population. Instead, much of this land came to be acquired by a large and well-connected agroindustrial conglomerate, which used a variety of methods to dispossess coffee growers, including financing and then foreclosing on capital-starved farmers, but also outright force when necessary. When the drop in global coffee prices exposed the fraudulent nature of most of the conglomerate's portfolio, the coffee sector that had grown so dependent on this company collapsed.

In the context of this collapse, farmworkers in Matagalpa began to mobilize. Their grievances centered on what they identified as the thread of continuity running through the iterative cycles of dispossession they had experienced: the absence of meaningful agrarian reform. When the conflict came to a dramatic head in 2002, the government negotiated an agreement to end the mobilization. Wilson challenges those observers who consider this agreement a victory for the workers, noting that their central demand—ownership of land—has not been fulfilled. By centering the experiences of farmworkers—a category of coffee producer that is often neglected in the voluminous literature on the coffee commodity chain—Wilson highlights the historical conditions producing an ongoing dispossession of rural communities in Matagalpa that is an essential feature of the local economy and its articulation into the global coffee chain.

Elizabeth Havice and Liam Campling (2013) draw on a disarticulations perspective to address debates regarding 'upgrading' in the mainstream commodity chain literature. Increasingly, upgrading has become synonymous with 'development', reintroducing a modernization-type sequential trajectory, albeit at the firm level. Havice and Campling argue for the need to understand how shifts identified as 'upgrading' in this literature are in fact linked to processes of inclusion, marginalization, and exclusion in/from chains. They illustrate their argument through a comparative account of the participation of four small island states in the tuna commodity chain. As early participants in the chain, the governments of the Solomon Islands and Fiji exerted resource sovereignty over their fishing waters in order to leverage foreign investment in tuna processing plants, bolstered by preferential access to the EU market under the Lomé Convention. This strategy met with some success, and the resulting firms became major suppliers of canned tuna to the UK market. However, when the British retailer Sainsbury began to squeeze prices in the late 1990s, the already waning competitive position of these producers collapsed, and their sectors were 'downgraded' to contract production of skinned and boned tuna for canning elsewhere.

Downgrading in the Solomon Islands and Fiji occurred alongside the incorporation of new island economies into the tuna chain. As in the previous cases, the new entrants—the Seychelles and Papua New Guinea—leveraged their sovereign control over fishing waters via licensing to attract investment in canning. Yet multinationals were able to extract additional incentives from these governments eager to create cannery jobs. While the government of Papua New Guinea in particular successfully leveraged these conditions in order to become an important site of tuna processing, such cases of successful upgrading require critical scrutiny. Havice and Campling remind us that what they call the environmental conditions of production—that is, access to fishing resources—is the necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the shift from resource extraction to processing. Moreover, specific trajectories of upgrading appear precarious, as multinationals look for ways to secure tuna resources while processing minimal amounts in these higher cost, remote locations. In short, Havice and Campling show the specific workings of upgrading and downgrading, together with the inclusion and expulsion of workers and places. Their contribution also addresses the technomanagerialist bias of much of the upgrading literature, which attributes increased value creation and capture to firm–firm links. Instead, we see the key role of the state in subsidizing foreign investment in the industry, absorbing the latter's losses, and acting as a manager of last resort.

Marketization as framing

A second set of contributions shares a broader interest in the contingent formation of market-inside and market-outside whenever humans, nonhumans, and places are connected with global commodity and supply chains. Although the vocabulary used differs, all four papers in one way or another explore processes of framing/overflowing or disentangling/entangling as key moments in the production and stabilization of 'economic' entities and the subjects that populate them.

Like Havice and Campling, Annelies Goger's (2013) paper on Sri Lanka's apparel industry challenges the conventional conceptualization of upgrading as a technomanagerial process of repositioning the firm within a particular set of value-adding activities. However, Goger interrogates upgrading as a discursive process in which repositioning is linked to various framing exercises. She shows that apparel industrialists, eager to improve the reputation of their industry and rehabilitate the image of garment workers, reframe the latter within the landscape of domestic cultural politics as exemplars of an appropriate Sri Lankan modernity that is distinct from Western values and practices. This domestic revaluation of garment workers occurs alongside and in tandem with an external reframing of the Sri Lankan apparel industry, as producers aim to differentiate their country from other apparel producers by presenting it as an ethical, high-quality sourcing location for global buyers. Just as the banana agroindustrialists described in Brown's paper market their industry's history of philanthropy under the Fairtrade label, Sri Lanka's factory owners are trying to leverage ethical claims and particular programs to stabilize their country's position within the highly volatile and footloose apparel commodity chain. These instances reveal that framings assume their force against that which lies outside—in the Sri Lankan case, this outside includes the discourse of disposability that devalues garment workers and, by extension, casts into relief the temporary and unstable nature of export-processing zones as spaces of development (Wright, 2006).

Yet Goger's case also reveals the limits to reframing efforts. Despite management practices to valorize garment workers and stabilize the attachment of this feminized workforce to the labor market, most women leave factory employment after marriage. Furthermore, management's efforts to reframe garment workers as 'good girls' and 'team players' may challenge gendered stereotypes of garment workers, but they do not necessarily undermine other kinds of gendered social constructions or the gendered divisions of labor that they reflect and sustain. Men continue to be excluded from sewing jobs on the production floor and women workers from rural areas face seemingly insurmountable barriers to enter management positions. Thus, Goger's analysis connects with recent feminist scholarship, which suggests that the incorporation of gendered labor into commodity circuits is less a matter of recruiting already constituted workers than a process that requires the ongoing production and mobilization of social difference in place (Ramamurthy, 2011; Salzinger, 2003).

In Christian Berndt's (2013) paper there is a similar discussion of the way labor is standardized as 'modern' in Mexico's maquiladora plants and how these framings connect with spatial boundaries in the plants and in the city, creating an 'outside within'. As one of the oldest and largest centers of maquiladoras production, Ciudad Juárez is framed simultaneously as an exemplar of a modern and developed Mexico that is coming into being, and as the epicenter of a backward and dysfunctional Mexico that must, but cannot, be left behind. In this border city the maquiladora is the ultimate border, demarcating these 'two' cities from each other and reproducing the boundary within it, as differentiations among 'core' and 'unstable' workers reflect and recreate the gradients of difference that give the city's landscape its form. Berndt is careful to emphasize that this instance of b/ordering not only serves to reinforce the maquiladora and the broader development model that it represents as the only viable solution to the violence and dispossession that plagues Juárez; it also effaces the role of the maquiladora sector in creating the very social disorder from which it offers deliverance. Capital thus appears as the mitigator of violence rather than a perpetuator of it, erasing connections between maquiladorization and narco-trafficking and neighborhood dispossession in the Mexican case. A parallel can be drawn here to Brown's paper, which documents a similar reframing of the historical connection between banana capital, paramilitaries, and estate workers (also Hough, 2011).

In Ciudad Juárez, this framing process is carried out "by a distributed alliance of elements—by humans (eg, US managers, members of the Juárez comprador class, workers) as much as by powerful ideas such as progress and modernization, or by sociotechnologies such as supply-chain management" (pages 2659–2660). Consistent with the emphasis in the marketization perspective on the partial and performative nature of articulation, Berndt argues that the modern maquila center that results from this assemblage is a precarious, unstable accomplishment. But, while efforts to disarticulate the modern Juárez from its troubled other can never fully succeed, these framing exercises are nevertheless a key way in which Ciudad Juárez is articulated into the cross-border trade and production networks that stretch across the US–Mexico border.

In her paper Leigh Johnson (2013) engages with the financialization of the management of agricultural production risks with the help of microinsurance products. As a particular manifestation of the "democratization of capital" (Roy, 2010, page 3), microinsurance is promoted by the development industry as a means to reduce vulnerability, 'crowd in' rural credit, and induce risk-taking behavior. The practice has major implications for rural relations of production and the position of peasants and small producers within global commodity circuits. At one level, the emergence of microinsurance in rural areas of the Global South can be read as a straightforward story of market formation: the discovery of an as-yet untapped and potentially lucrative customer base for a new class of financial products. But what Johnson shows is that marketization proceeds via the interpellation of new market subjects in the countryside. Rights-bearers (ie, farmers who have usufruct/property rights through their possession/ownership of land) are transformed into risk-bearers, whose economic security no longer rests on the actual performance of their crops.

Johnson's account makes clear that the microinsurance market operates literally on the edges of (non)market relations. The outside is constituted by traditional, nonmodern smallholders and the 'informal' risk-sharing and coping mechanisms on which they have historically depended. It is against the devaluation of these practices as 'traditional' and 'inefficient' that formal, market-based solutions are legitimized. In this way peasant smallholders are disarticulated from ostensibly backward practices and are transformed into risk-taking entrepreneurial farmers. This reframing occurs with the help of sociotechnical devices, including environmental indices, field experiments, behavioral games, and standardized insurance schemes (eg, calculation of insurance prices). Agricultural producers cum financial products consumers are now ‘free’ to shift their orientation from subsistence farming to commercial crops. Thus, financialization is a mechanism that facilitates new articulations of rural regions into agricultural commodity circuits, thereby recasting the boundary between market and nonmarket. However, by pointing to the less-than-enthusiastic take-up of these products by their intended beneficiaries, Johnson also reminds us that the technologies and representations used to instantiate markets and market relations are always partial, uneven, and contested in their effects.

Rosemary-Claire Collard and Jessica Dempsey (2013) also reveal the framing devices at work in their comparison of two forms of commodified nature: the exotic pet trade and ecosystem carbon. This comparison is driven by ethicopolitical concerns: why, they ask, do some forms of commodified life become the object of widespread political protest while other forms are more readily accepted and assimilated into normal human–nonhuman relations? To answer this question, the authors argue that the commodification of nature is underpinned by an enduring species hierarchy enshrined in European thought wherein nature is made disposable through its enrollment in capitalism as a source of value. Their paper theorizes this de/valuation as an “exclusion–inclusion couplet that is produced by and reproduces species difference and hierarchy” (page 2692).

By asking what qualities matter when nonhuman life is commodified, the authors distinguish two modes of valuation: “an individualized, ‘encounterable’ life” in the exotic pet trade, and “an aggregate, reproductive life” in ecosystem services (page 2682). On the one hand, exotic pets must be severed from their habitat in order to circulate as ‘lively’ commodities. On the other hand, ecosystem carbon is produced as a carbon credit through scientific practices that work as ‘socially necessary abstractions’ to define and delineate ecosystems and quantify their carbon effects in ways that allow for their universal circulation as exchangeable commodities. These modes of valuation are put to work with the help of market devices, and entail different processes of dis/entanglement and dis/articulation. Exotic pets are articulated with commodity circuits by way of singularization, disentangling them from their kinship and ecosystemic networks. Ecosystem services function through a logic of aggregation, articulating an assemblage of nonhumans in a way that allows this actor-network to be transformed into something of economic value. These forms of commodification simultaneously devalue nonhuman natures, cast as being ‘outside’ the market and marked as ‘disposable’. Ultimately, the value-ing of nature through capitalist commodification reproduces the value hierarchy, shifting the biopolitical break between lives and natures that are ‘worth’ saving, and those that can be left to die.

In sum, the papers in this theme issue contribute rich, theoretically sophisticated enquiries into the boundaries and limits of capitalist commodity production, theorizing how these shifts draw upon and remake uneven geographies. While we have organized our discussion of the contributions into ‘disarticulations’ and ‘marketization’ sections, many of the papers can be read through the lens of either framework. Doing so reveals different aspects of the processes of inclusion/exclusion that constitute capitalist commodity circuits. Both this collection and its precursor provide conceptual tools for advancing the broad project of critical studies into commodity chains, which we hope will find its echoes in geography, sociology and cognate fields.

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